ESPRIT DE L'ESCAIHER: PRINTS BY BARBARA BLOOM

Barbara Bloom provides this definition in the catalogue of her recent work. The shadowy phrase is the subject, or metaphor, for a number of dissimilar works, developed over the last few years, and recently incorporated into a single coherent installation, "Esprit de l'Escalier." In her works, objects, sets and texts she evokes spectors of visibility and invisibility, absence and presence. Among its other manifestations, the Spirit of the Staircase materializes in a remarkable suite of prints - blank sheets of hand-made paper in which the only visible image is the watermark impression.

Bloom is an artist difficult to classify in terms of media. For the last decade she has been producing work in a wide range of formats - film, performance, graphic design, objects, and installations - all of which revolve around questions of epistemology and vision. Her pieces have been presented in galleries, museums, and publications throughout Europe, where she has spent most of her adult life.

Bloom has made editions before, among them a set of sixty embossed plates with prints in place of monograms - one of them read "esprit de l'escalier." The 3PU pieces are closer to traditional editions of prints, but they are unorthodox in two fundamental respects: they were not conceived as an extension of drawing or painting but rather as objects in their own right, and, more importantly, it is rather peculiar to make prints in such a way that the image is only occasionally visible.

For those not familiar with the esthetics of paper the watermarks are those transient logos found in good quality stationery and in art papers. They are an especially hot subject for an artist whose work engages the seen and the unseen, the politics of presentation and belief, as its basic material. The seven prints, which make up one room of "Esprit de l'Escalier," give form and body to these immaterial forces.

The paper for Bloom's edition was handmade by Diane Donnez Press and Paper in New York. The sheets, which measure 24 x 18 inches, are composed of matted cotton fiber, thinning to an irregular deckle edge all around. The appearance of a thin, somewhat blotter-like page, creamy white but interrupted by small ticks and pips of aberrant particles.

The texture and appearance of a paper is always important to the character of the art that employs it, but it is especially pertinent to these prints because, unless they are read from behind, the flat paper surface is all that one can see.

"Print" is perhaps an awkward word in this circumstance - suggesting, as it does, traditional media like etching, lithography, and silkscreen. The method used here does not reproduce images on a sheet of paper, as usual, or with a sheet of paper, as in the paper-making resurgency of the Seventies, but casts the picture like a wrath within it.

Watermark images result from the depressions left in a sheet of paper by a variation in the thickness of the paper-making screen. Traditionally they have been used to identify mills and manufacturers, and were made by wear or sordid and paper-making image into the mesh against which the paper is made. Smooth on one side, the paper would be ever so slightly indented where it fell against the wire, and when held up to the light would reveal the image.

To prepare the finely graded watermarks Bloom needed, she approached and worked with J.J. Plank Corporation, a manufacturer of commercial paper-making equipment which has pioneered a method of reproducing photographs in watermark form. Essentially, the light and dark areas of the original photograph are transformed into levels of high and low relief on an etched plate. The paper-making screen is then made to conform to this relief so that paper will be thinnest in the areas where the photograph was lightest, and thickest where the original was dark. At this point hand-tooling is used to clarify and accentuate points of light and dark. The watermark is thus attached to the sheets, and the paper is cast against it.

When Bloom's watermark prints are held up to the light, their physical composition is revealed further. The surface becomes a dim and faintly luminous field, the pitting out of the pulp toward the deckle produces a coarse and throughout the page one begins to notice small irregularities. But there, hovering in the center of each page, defined only by the regulation of light as it passes through the varying thicknesses of paper, are fuzzy photographic images - a man and small boy pointing upward at three suspicious aerial bobbles; a pair of landscapes, one above the other, accompanied by floating discs, side-by-side, two viewers of a Jules Verne-style demonic saucer frittering over the two tips and telephone wires a rocky outcropping beneath an armada of Saturn-shaped spaceships, and so on.

These pictures, like others used in Bloom's work, are borrowed from the popular press - sensationalist tabloids and press releases eager to demonstrate irrefutable proof of extraterrestrial invasion. Bloom, who grew up in Los Angeles and studied with John Baldessari at the California Institute of the Arts, uses movies, advertising, and newspaper pictures as source material, and as icons for systems of seeing and believing. She has been collecting photographs of UFOs for the last decade and she is captivated by the bizarre charm of parapsychological photography - the residual documentation of the supernatural, or the proof of the unreal.

Although the photograph has been intellectually debunked as an arbiter of truth, it still carries residue conviction. Instinctively we feel that something must have been there to produce that image, and we trust it far more than a drawing or verbal account. It is, on some level, a more believable record. Seeing may be a matter of will, but photography is a matter of physics. Parapsychological photography blurs these distinctions.

In Bloom's hands these photographs become so subtle one could almost mistake the saucers for aberrant clumps in the paper, small grains of sand, grainy dust. Even framed and bolted with nails to the wall - as they are presented in the installation, the prints are not immediately legible.

In its usual role in life the watermark is both seen and unseen. It is typically visible only to those who are obsessive enough, or precisely enough, or investigatory enough to care about such things. It can, as the J.J. Plank brochure points out, “distinguish specialty papers processed for governments, corporations, fraternal societies, and other organizations.” It is the kind of thing one expects fictional super-cool detectives to notice - an identifying sign that demands attention and a ratified, encyclopedic knowledge.

It is the ambiguous evidence of the unseen that haunts the rooms of Esprit de l'Escalier. The installation, which was commissioned by and for Hallwall's in Buffalo, unfolds in four successive chambers. Each is inhabited by a different type of object, a different form of exhibit, a different subject, but all address the extent to which seeing is believing and witnessing can be seeing.

The first room one enters is hung with Works for the Blind, a series from 1982 which combines photographs of parapsychological feats like levitation with a braille text on the experience of seeing. At the center of the room is the physical testimony to sight-of-eye - a saucer-like dish on a pedestal with a round aperture at the top through which one sees to see an orb floating in space (in reality the reflection of a pearl against the shiny surface of the bowl).

Another space is cordoned off and filled with stacked cheeseboards that are floating like an otherwise millenarian shop in an optically obscure space of periwinkle blue.

The two central rooms are the gallery of UFO prints and a parlor for supernormal visions. The latter is furnished with a round table covered by a ghostly white tablecloth that reaches to the floor (hiding its physical contours). Invisible to touch, but people tough hands, are set with chin plates that reproduce photographs of seances in the form of relief, illegible, invisible acts, are depicted by their material remains. That form of invisibility can be portrayed in Bloom's working premise:

The expression, Esprit de l'Escalier, is both a metaphor - a ghost of regret - and a description extended from one easily visualized parapsychological pun, an encampment of linguistic yearning, and a poetic realization of cosmic phenomena and lost visions. In the blind trace of a watermark, Bloom shows us UFOs. She chose the UFO photos because "if you believe in these phenomena the photos prove their existence. If you don't, they are sure proof of folly. They are perfect indicators of belief!"

Susan Tallman